

Populism as a thin ideology

Cas Mudde¹

The Populist Zeitgeist

Populism seems to become stronger the more intellectuals criticize it.²

SINCE THE 1980S THE RISE OF SO-CALLED 'POPULIST PARTIES' HAS GIVEN rise to thousands of books, articles, columns and editorials. Most of them are of an alarming nature, as these 'new populists' are generally seen as a threat to liberal democracy. Though authors are not always sure what exactly characterizes these parties, they do agree that parties like the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ), the French National Front (FN), or the Dutch List Pim Fortuyn (LPF) are 'populist'. Another point on which most commentators agree is that 'populism is understood as a pathological form, pseudo- and post-democratic, produced by the corruption of democratic ideals'.³ German scholars in particular consider right-wing populists, in line with the theory of Erwin K. Scheuch and Hans-Dieter Klingemann, to be a 'normal pathology' of western democracies.⁴

¹ Earlier versions of this article have been presented to the Faculty of Political and Social Sciences of the University of Antwerp, the Department of Politics of the University of Reading and at the workshop 'Populism and Democracy' at the University of Nottingham. I want to thank all participants for their comments. In addition, I want to thank Hans-Georg Betz, Dani Filc and Peter Mair for their valuable comments on earlier versions. Special thanks go to Jan Jagers, whose intellectual input has been crucial in the final revisions. Finally, I am grateful for the generous financial support from the British Academy and the Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland.

² Pierre-André Taguieff, 'Political Science Confronts Populism: From a Conceptual Mirage to a Real Problem', *Idées*, 105 (1995), p. 43.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁴ Erwin K. Scheuch and Hans-Dieter Klingemann, 'Theorie des Rechtsradikalismus in westlichen Industriegesellschaften', *Hamburg Jahrbuch für Wirtschafts- und Sozialpolitik*, 12 (1967), pp. 11–19. While they used this terminology for right-wing radicalism, recent authors have also applied it to right-wing populism. See, most notably, Hans-Georg Betz, *Radical Right-Wing Populism in Western Europe*, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1994.

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Cas Mudde

Stanley Wade Shelton UGAF Professor, [University of Georgia](#)
Verified email at uga.edu - [Homepage](#)

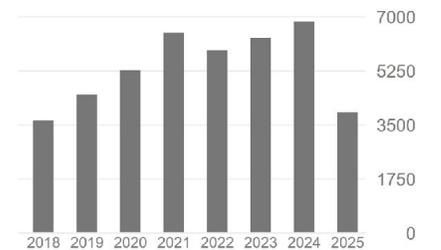
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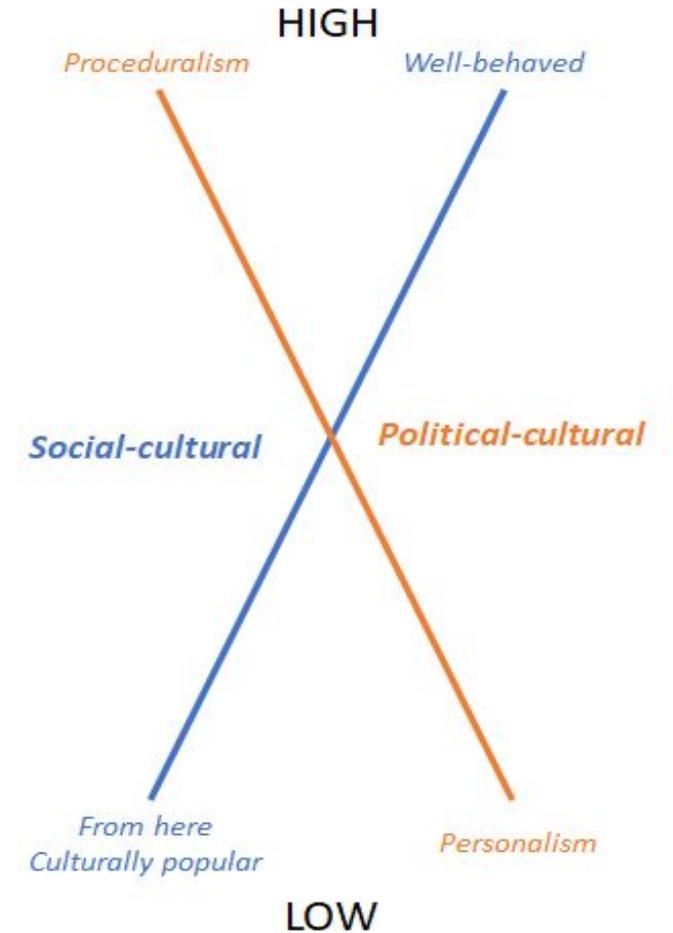
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How populist are the people? Measuring populist attitudes in voters A Akkerman, C Mudde, A Zaslove	1648	2014

High:
Self-contained,
institutional



Low:
close to the
people



Euroskepticism?

Skepticism: doubt as to the truth of something.

Euroscepticism is a political stance characterized by skepticism or opposition towards the European Union and its powers.

Hard vs Soft Euroscepticism

- Hard Euroscepticism (Taggart & Szcerbiak, 2001)
→ Total rejection of EU integration; oppose joining or remaining in EU
- Soft Euroscepticism
→ Opposition to specific policies or aspects of EU

Blurred Boundaries

- Kopecky & Mudde (2002): demarcation unclear
- Key question: How many policy rejections turn 'soft' into 'hard'?
 - Example: Opposing 3+ policies — still soft or now hard?

Sławomir Mentzen (Confederation - Konfederacja)

Politics

Meet the far-right candidate brewing trouble in Poland's presidential race

Mentzen, known for his advocacy to liberalise gun laws and his staunch opposition to abortion in all circumstances, including cases of rape, has made social media his home.

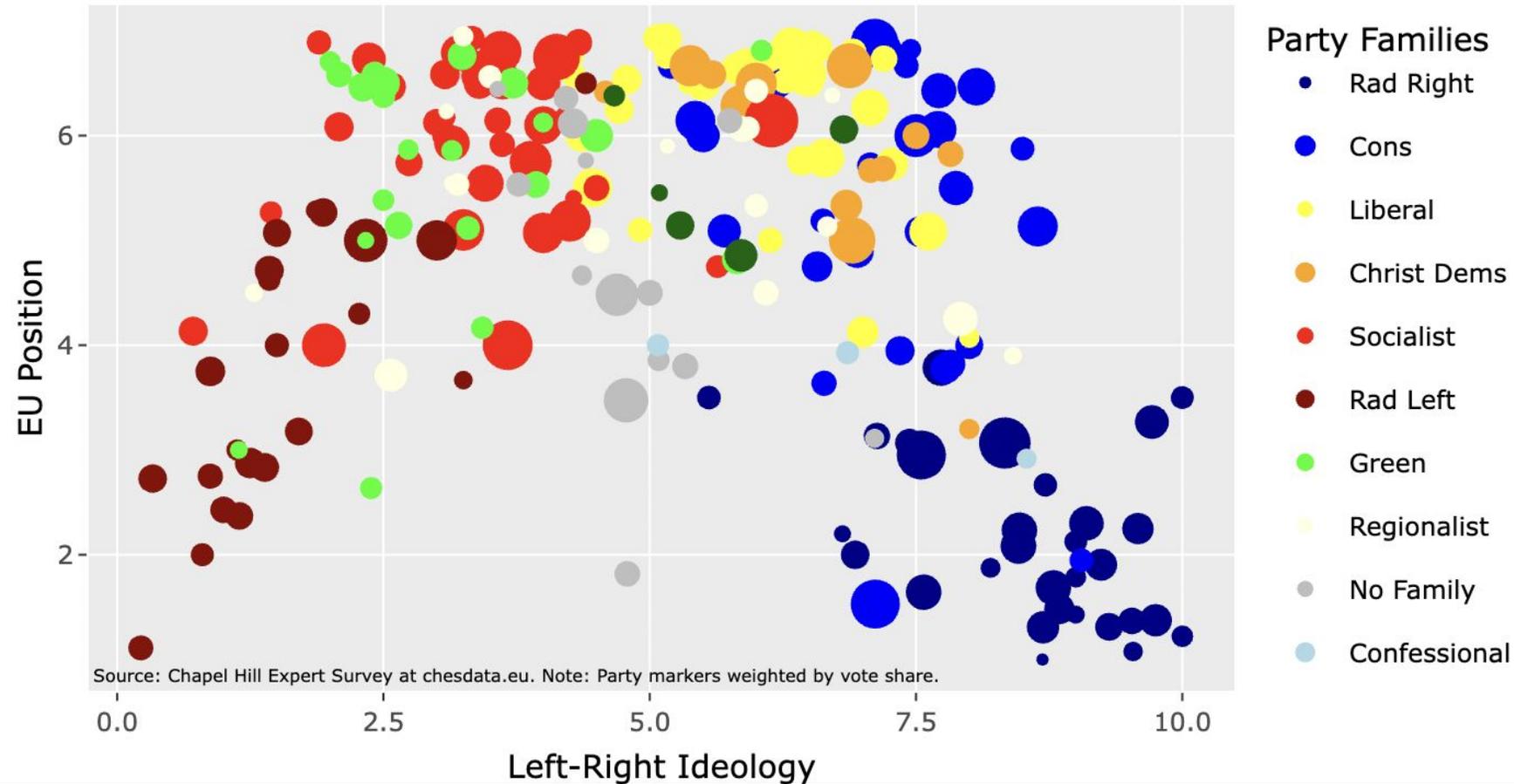


- Position on the EU: Strongly Eurosceptic, though not calling for immediate Polesxit
 - Rejects EU centralization and federalist tendencies
 - Opposes EU migration quotas, Green Deal policies, and deeper fiscal integration
 - Criticizes EU interference in Poland's domestic affairs, particularly judiciary and social policy
 - Frames the EU as a threat to national sovereignty
 - Presents EU policies as being driven by liberal-globalist elites

(<https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/meet-the-far-right-candidate-brewing-trouble-in-polands-presidential-racepolands-presidential-election/>)

Party Euroscepticism: Inverted U-Curve

Left-Right Ideology vs EU Position in all countries 2019



Source: Jolly, S., R. Bakker, L. Hooghe, G. Marks, J. Polk, J. Rovny, M. Steenbergen, and M. Vachudova. 2022. "Chapel Hill Expert Survey Trend File, 1999-2019." *Electoral Studies* 75 (February)

Four core
arguments
to discuss...

Populism as emancipatory or a corrective
to liberal democracy

Populism as democratic but illiberal

Populism as a threat to liberal democracy

Debates about populism and democracies
are muddied by anti-populist bias

Transatlantic Populism? Trump and the EU (30 minutes)

- This simulation aims to explore the convergence/divergence of populist narratives in the United States and Europe, and evaluate the prospects for stronger transatlantic cooperation under populist leadership.
- Students are divided into two groups: one as supporters of Trump and one EU-based actors.
- Each group will explore: arguments for and against stronger EU–US cooperation with possible key flashpoints: foreign policy, trade, nationalism, and/or security.
- Groups conduct quick research and prepare short arguments in 10 minutes.
- Each group presents a 3–4 minute argument, followed by a wrap up session on how does regional context shape populist mobilisation and institutional impact?

In depth

Level of interaction	Examples
Political Parties	AUR (Romania), Fidesz (Hungary), Rassemblement National (France), Lega (Italy)
Political Leaders	Donald Trump, Viktor Orbán, Giorgia Meloni
Think Tanks & Foundations	Danube Institute, Heritage Foundation, Mathias Corvinus Collegium
Civil Society Orgs & NGOs	CitizenGO, Ordo Iuris, Pro-life and pro-family groups
Media & Influencers	Breitbart, Tucker Carlson, social media influencers like Laura Loomer
Religious Institutions	Conservative Christian or Orthodox networks aligned with nationalist values

Farmers protests in Europe 2023-2024

Series of protests by farmers and agricultural organizations targeting the European green Deal (Finger et al. 2024; Žuk 2024)

- **Transnational:** Growing movement including many European countries and beyond (UK and Switzerland)
- **Catch-all political platform:**
 - **Many grievances:** low profits, high input costs, powerful retailers, stringent environmental and bureaucratic requirements, ever-changing political landscape
 - **Contextual variation:** e.g., focus on subsidies and taxes on fuel ad vehicles (DE); CO2 tax and governmental land buy out (DK); lifting trade barriers with Ukraine (PO)
- **Shared discursive dichotomy:** farmers vs elite

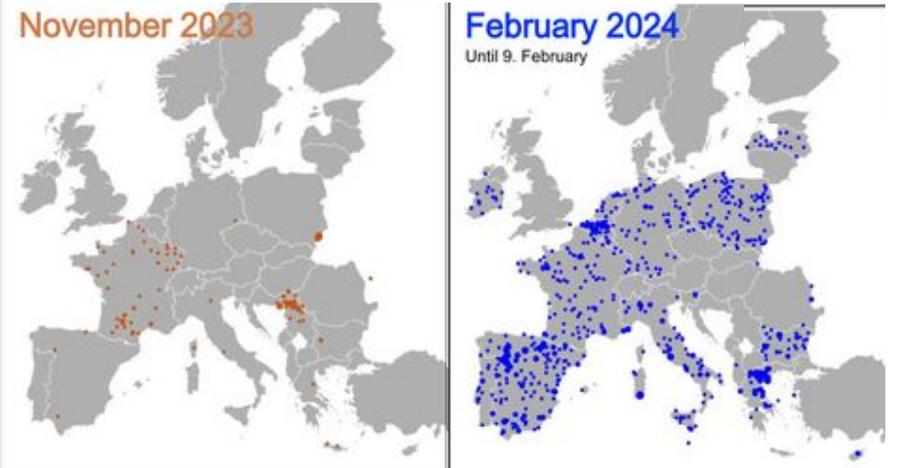
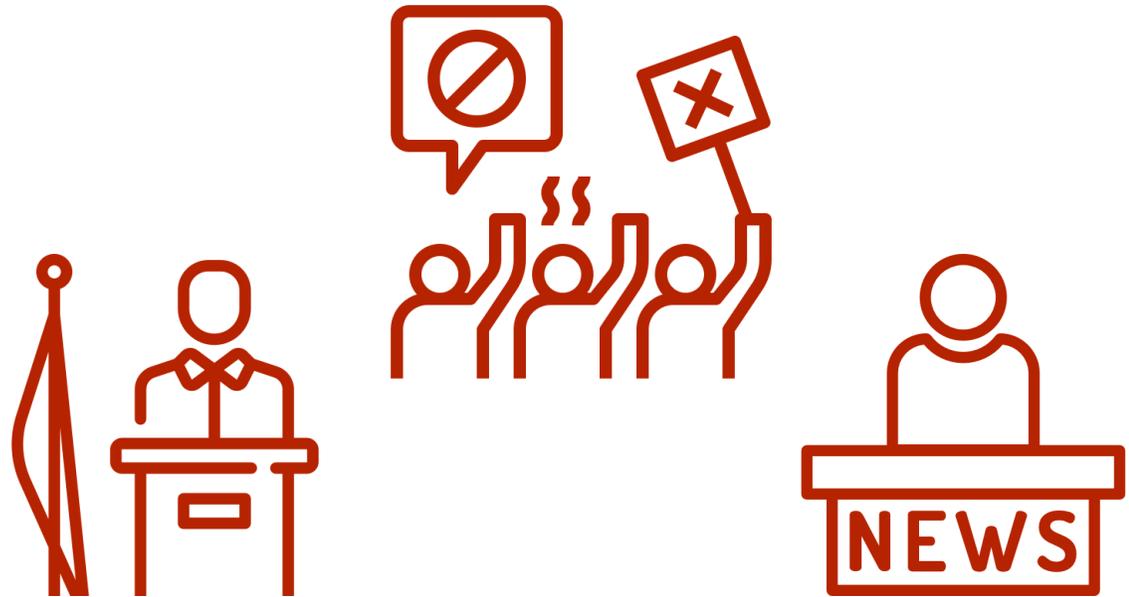


Figure adapted from Finger, R., Fabry, A., Kammer, M., Candel, J., Dalhaus, T. and Meemken, E.M. (2024), *Farmer Protests in Europe 2023–2024*. *EuroChoices*, 23: 59-63

Can you make some examples of opposition to populism?



Who are opponents to populist parties in your opinion?





'State-led debilitation or destruction of political institutions that sustain an existing democracy' p. 5



Less common: *Open-ended coups* or blatant *election-day fraud*



More common: Hold regular elections but concentrate power through *executive aggrandizement*, *strategic harassment of opposition* and *manipulation of electoral rules*



Fraczekland's President Eustice Billede meeting with Russia's foreign minister, July 2025 (AI generated).

How should the EU respond to FRACZEKLAND's controversial new policies, if at all?

Think about

...what about advantages and disadvantages for the EU?

...should the EU intervene at all?